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AUTHOR Thornberry, Nancy Ann
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ABSTRACT

This paper offers suggestions to help principals create a support system within their schools as an effective management technique. Based on the experiences of a new principal at Prairie Rock Elementary School in College Station, Texas, guidelines are offered for dealing with the faculty and staff, the new principal's first focus. Key issues involve effective communication, delegation of leadership, and the recognition of faculty accomplishments. Strategies for dealing with parents are outlined next; these strategies stress availability and communication. Finally, techniques for interacting with students that involve recognizing student accomplishment, offering incentives and special events, and fostering student involvement, are discussed. A conclusion is that working together with mutual trust and respect in a supportive environment can significantly help a principal succeed in school management. (LMI)

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BUILDING SUPPORT AS AN EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUE

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Presenter:

Dr. Nancy Ann Thornberry
Principal, Rock Prairie Elementary (PK-4)
College Station Independent School District
3400 Welsh
College Station, Texas 77845
409-764-5570
FAX 409-764-5486

EA 024 940

BUILDING SUPPORT
AS AN
EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUE

Upon being named the new Principal for Rock Prairie Elementary in College Station, Texas, the author immediately faced the challenge of establishing a comfortable rapport among faculty and staff, students, and parents as each group carefully scrutinized and waited to see what the new leadership would bring. Change is difficult and often includes a period of uncertainty. Such is the case when a new principal walks into a school building to become the new leader. Not only does the principal experience normal apprehensions about the job, but the faculty and staff, students, and parents begin to formulate impressions about how successful or unsuccessful the new administrator might prove to be. Therefore, it is imperative for a newly hired principal to immediately begin to lay the foundation for a support base in order to effectively manage the daily operations of the school and the responsibilities of the position.

Building support should focus on the different populations of the campus for the primary purpose of establishing a positive working relationship that includes mutual trust. Such a plan is delineated with suggested examples to assist principals in building a positive support system as an effective management technique which is characteristic of a successful organization. This plan consists of ways to effectively communicate and motivate or spark enthusiasm among the school environment to obtain support for the organization and its leadership.

Faculty and Staff

The faculty and staff should be the first focus of attention for the new principal. From the first day of arriving on the job, everything that the principal does, whether verbal or non-verbal or even silence, will be interpreted by others. Therefore, it is crucial for the new administrator to be aware of how his or her messages are presented, and how they will be perceived.

As the opportunity arises to meet each faculty or staff member, whether individually or in a group, it is important to be positive and friendly as well as ready to listen or talk about the year ahead. Learning the names of each as soon as possible is also very essential, especially when there are many.

Additionally, being organized in preparing for the opening of school with schedules, a faculty meeting agenda, refreshments, or other necessary "first-of-the-year" materials will contribute to a good beginning.

As the school year progresses, here are some practical suggestions to develop a support base among faculty and staff:

* Recognize the work of teachers, paraprofessionals, secretaries, custodians, and cafeteria staff by writing individual thanks of appreciation when a job is well done or notes of praise for a special achievement that has been noted. Occasionally, it may be necessary to write a note to a specific grade level or department for the same purpose.

* At several appropriate times during the year, take the time to send a schoolwide newsletter to mention any of the faculty and staff by name with their accomplishments or honors or any special deeds that they have performed. This technique provides a means of recognition for those individuals as well as informing others about them. Or if preferred, each faculty meeting could include a time to mention noteworthy successes or comments about individuals.

* Provide a weekly communication of announcements and events to keep everyone informed. Through our *Campus Notes*, which are distributed in a newsletter format each Friday in the school mailboxes, campus employees receive directives and pertinent notices that keep them abreast of what's happening in the building or among the "school family."

* Other written forms of communication may be provided through a campus calendar of all scheduled events displayed in a visible and daily traveled area, a xeroxed copy of the campus calendar distributed on a monthly basis, and a faculty/staff handbook with procedures, guidelines, and other important data in a special section for memorandums.

* At least two to three times per semester, schedule grade level, department, or staff meetings during conference or break times. This will serve to provide two-way communication in a small group setting. At this time, allow individuals to bring up any matter deemed important to discuss. Talking out situations often eliminates future potential problems and indicates to the group that the administrator cares and is willing to listen, especially in terms of concern.

* Make time for your faculty and staff, whether visiting in the classrooms, stopping for informal hall "chats", making a special effort to have lunch more frequently with them, or engaging in individual or group conferences in the office.

* In the evaluation process with each faculty and staff member, reiterate all strengths and areas for improvement or change in an individual conference setting. Specific examples and suggestions should be delineated. Verbalizing an evaluation proves to be more meaningful than depositing a written performance report in one's school mailbox. Being able to discuss all points of the process and accentuate the most positive segments sends a message that the principal, indeed, cares enough about the individual to help him or her improve.

* Allow others to assume leadership roles through chairing committees, presenting staff development sessions, providing input in various site-based committee structures, and participating in shared decision-making. Learn to let go, delegate, and have confidence in the talent on your campus. For example, the faculty and staff will be more supportive of the staff

development programs for the year, if they have had significant input in the planning process.

* Designate areas in the office or noticeable spots in the building to honor or recognize individuals, such as "Positive Notes about the Faculty" or "Teacher of the Year Hall of Fame." Sharing awards, newsclippings, positive letters from parents about a teacher or several teachers, announcements of a special family event such as the birth of a teacher's grandchild, or a teacher's notification that his or her manuscript has been accepted for publication are just a few suggestions for highlighting.

* Set an example and be a model for your faculty and staff in terms of expectations. For example, if a request has been made for each to formulate and submit written goals for the year according to a specific format, then the principal, in turn, should do the same and present them to the group.

* Perhaps one of the most important facets of building support is through the avoidance of "playing favorites." It also entails the belief that teachers and staff are talented in different ways and diversification is healthy and acceptable.

Parents

As parents learn of the announcement of the appointment of the "new principal", the principal automatically becomes the primary topic of conversation in that school community. Parents are generally curious, especially regarding any specific plans or changes the new administrator might want to make. Some parents will make an effort to drop by the school before school commences to get acquainted, while the majority will wait until a later date. Regardless of the time, all will be anticipating your message or plan of action. Again, first impressions are often lasting.

To begin building support, plan a meeting with key parent groups, such as the PTO

Board, parent volunteer leaders, or parents in advisory capacities on campus committees. Provide information about your background or educational philosophy and communicate your appreciation and willingness to work with parents in an "open door" manner.

After the initial step in becoming acquainted with many of the parents, the following techniques may be incorporated at appropriate times in order to garner further parental support:

* Plan a "New Student Orientation" evening to invite parents and new students to the campus to learn about the school and its programs and to take a guided tour to become familiar with the layout of the building prior to the first day of school.

* Schedule "Kindergarten Orientation", "First Grade Orientation", and orientations for other grade levels, all on different evenings during the first few weeks of school, in order to inform parents of the expectations for the year. Grading procedures, the discipline plan, homework, academic goals for the year, and other pertinent information may be relayed to parents at the orientations. This provides another avenue for parents to become cognizant of the school, and more than likely supportive after becoming informed.

* Prepare schoolwide brochures and enlist the faculty and staff to create grade level and department brochures to distribute to parents. At Rock Prairie Elementary, a series of twelve brochures have been developed over the past year in order to "tell the story" about our campus.

* Begin a school newspaper, if one is not already in existence at your school. Published each month or once during each grading period, a school newspaper may serve as a primary communicator to the parents of your students, especially to those parents who do not visit the building on a regular basis, in informing them of special upcoming events or new programs or other important messages that may need to be transmitted to all parents.

* Return phone calls to parents in a timely manner and be willing to listen to parents in your office with their concerns or problems. Be polite, speak in a courteous manner, thank parents for bringing situations to your attention, and follow up on any requests for assistance. It is also necessary to be consistent in decisions or other matters as related to parents.

* Be visible to parents at all school functions and greet them with smiles and enthusiasm in order to convey a positive and inviting environment as they make visits to the campus. If the administrator reflects a positive image, then parents are more inclined to view the principal and school positively as well.

* Plan an appreciation luncheon in May for all parent volunteers, room mothers, parent committee members, and all others who have contributed in a special way to the success of the school year. Enlist the aid of faculty and staff to submit parent names for the guest list, provide at least one food item for the luncheon, help serve, and write notes of thanks to parents who have provided a service in their respective classrooms.

* Extend an invitation to all parents to attend a "Coffee with the Principals" or a "Parents' Night with the Principals." By scheduling a session each semester, the principal and assistant principal may use this time in a relaxed, informal setting to explain new programs or pilot programs, reveal plans for a special event, or report on any other school matters. Parents, in turn, are provided the opportunity to ask questions, give positive feedback, raise concerns over proposed changes, and contribute insights with respect to improvements or any negative aspects of the school. As administrators are willing to listen, discuss, clarify misunderstandings, and view situations in terms of parental perspectives, parents will feel that their input and voice is really important.

* Strive to solicit parents from all backgrounds and ethnic groups to serve on campus

committees. This measure will yield support from all groups and procure diversity in viewpoints and shared decision-making.

Students

As a new principal, the first day of school will likely be the time for introductions to the student body. On this exciting day, make an effort to greet as many children as possible. After everyone has reported to their classrooms, start making the rounds to each class to introduce yourself with a warm, welcoming message. Continue to be visible to students, whether greeting them during morning arrivals, walking through the halls, visiting in the cafeteria during lunch time, or saying good-bye at the end of the day.

Progressing through the year, there are numerous ways that a principal may encounter students, develop rapport, and establish a mutual support system. These ways include the following suggestions:

* Start a "Happy Visit" program in which any teacher may send a note to the office stating what a child has done special, whether good work, good behavior, an improvement accomplished, or other reason. As a result, the student earns a visit with the principal in a positive and rewarding setting.

* Institute incentives such as displaying good cafeteria behavior, being a "TV Buster" winner, or obtain other creative ideas from the staff in order for students to earn the reward of eating lunch with the principals. On my campus, these lunches occur in our courtyard area or in the administrative conference room. Not only is it a highlight for the students being rewarded, but it is an opportunity for the principals to serve as positive role models for the children as well as become better acquainted in a fun time setting. In addition, the students take their excitement home to their parents.

* Take time to have fun with the students. At Halloween, the author may be seen in a clown costume at the Fall Festival and a Mrs. Santa suit at Christmas. For the recent Talent Jamboree in the closing finale, "The Principal and the Howling Hound Dog Act", was a big hit with the students and parents.

* Plan special events with the faculty to schedule memorable days for children that involves fun, yet meaningful learning experiences. Examples might be "Paperless Day" --- a day of lessons with no paper of any type; "Jog into Reading Day" --- a day to wear jogging suits with an emphasis on reading, storytelling, book projects, and more; "April Fool's Viola Swamp Day" --- a day for teachers to exchange teaching positions and surprise students as their new teacher for the day with many fun and creative lessons (the P.E. teacher may become a fourth grade teacher for the day, while a kindergarten teacher may take the role of the music teacher, etc.). Such days become unforgettable experiences for children and serve to further encourage school attendance.

* Extend as many opportunities as possible for students to engage in leadership roles on campus even if it is merely to announce the "Word of the Week" over the public address system, make an announcement during a parent program, be responsible for flag raising, take charge of campus litter pick-up for the week, carry out assignments to collect recycling materials in certain classrooms, or other such duties. Being an officer or a classroom representative in the Student Council may also afford unlimited possibilities for many schoolwide leadership roles.

* Highlight student accomplishments and honors through daily announcements, school programs, and the school newspaper. A display area may be designated for "Perfect Attendance" and "Honor Roll Students" for each reporting period.

* Remember to be a model for students in always sending notes of thanks for the many

gifts, flowers, food items, or precious handmade remembrances that are delivered to you or left on your desk, especially during the holiday times. It only takes a brief moment to write a quick note that will mean so much to a student.

Summary

These ideas are just a few suggestions that may be utilized or adapted in some manner to establish the creation of a support system among the faculty and staff, parents, and students of a school. Working together with mutual trust and respect in a supportive and pleasant environment can certainly have a significant impact and be a determining factor in how successful a principal is able to effectively manage all facets of the school throughout the year.